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Reason and Truth

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Reason and Truth

Abstract

This paper deals with the general concepts of reason and truth within education. A position is adopted to explain why reason needs considerably more attention, development, and exposure by educators to help counter the influence of pernicious, technical truths generated for society. Educators are chided a bit for becoming somewhat complacent and failing to stress reason as a dynamic approach for many serious problems. Historical examples and references to prominent individuals identify significant points.

Reason and Truth

Why is it that Alfred North Whitehead in 1912 said, "There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations."?[1] Whitehead, a brilliant philosopher and mathematician, was attempting to define the aim of education. For him an education is a patient mastering of details day by day then thoughtfully integrating them in order to understand our environment. Discipline and freedom, that rare functioning combination of traits, are essential parts of Whitehead's idea of an education.[2] This ideal situation is difficult to maintain, but it usually leads to a flowering of reason over truth.

As an institution, education is responsible for discovering truth, evaluating truth, and transmitting it to each generation. Truths from the Age of Reason (about 1650 to 1800) were promoted by the rationalists who believed in the mind's ability to discern order.[3] They found in mathematics an infallible method, a world-machine, to explain the secrets of nature. Faith in the rational behavior of nature and immutable scientific laws was established and maintained.[4] Reason emerged as a key element among educated people.

Today technology (i.e., computers and other cogent products of scientific enthusiasm) has been charged with explaining the secrets of nature by creating sophisticated systems to control and predict. A duality of scholar and technocrat has developed within many disciplines to keep pace with technical expansions.

This combination of roles reflects a society that is highly technical yet in need of scholarly values.

Scholars have traditionally been drawn to the concept of reason. About 80 years ago George Santayana wrote a thoughtful book titled Reason In Common Sense.[5] He explains, "The Life of Reason is the happy marriage of two elements -- impulse and ideation -- which if wholly divorced would reduce man to a brute or to a maniac."[6] Santayana believed a life of reason is, in a broad definition, a form of art. A technical environment puts some obvious strain on artistic expression through diminished human activity and concentrated, sharp, mechanical techniques.

Teaching is an art, and it has been said that, "Poet and thinker are near akin."[7] However, educators often must react to frenzied demands from an impatient society by providing utilitarian techniques to help students secure employment. Computer techniques and numerous trade school skills are interwoven into the curriculum of most institutions of higher education in an injudicious, routine matter.

High schools have already become saturated and burdened down with technical courses such as driver education. Junior colleges offer everything from cosmetology to computer programming. William Barrett wirily concludes, "The notion of progress itself has become a tricky and uncertain one by this time."[8]

Barrett believes, "Reason is not an isolated faculty, but one mode in which man stands open to the things in his world."[9] Educators have traditionally fostered concepts of reason within the general curriculum. This process now seems difficult to

preserve due to a multitude of technical demands. Technonogy does not stand open to the word; it is organized, confined, and righteous in nature. Reason, a slow process, is likely to be replaced by a quick, technical solution.

While education has been struggling to satisfy all of its strident constituents (students, parents, politicians, and teachers), there has been a gradual but pronounced shift from using reason to using technical truths as a basis for study. Technical truths are frequently rote, cookbook formulas with limited applications outside an immediate specialized domain. This fundamental jump to technical means, starting perhaps in the 1940's, has produced some brilliant technical thinkers with just a whisp of an understanding of Life in all its manifestations. If this is happening to bright, technical thinkers, what is happening to average or below average students? They are probably second-rate technical thinkers and function as third-rate citizens with only enough sense to come to work on time, products of a strained educational system.

In 1974 Michael D. Cohen and James G. March produced a Carnegie Commission Report on Higher Education titled Leadership and Ambiguity.[10] They are quite explicit and a bit harsh when expressing concerns about higher education: "As we have said repeatedly, the university is an organization that does not know what it is doing."[11] Educators attempt to meet demands from society but society (government, industry, and the public) is frequently in a quagmire and not able to unanimously support education.

With built-in institutional requirements aimed to satisfy

many constituents, educators often must teach a form of peevish truth that is fragmented and simple. It is sometimes a mediocre but intensely honest effort. Students want credentials; employers want a malleable someone with measurable skills, and educators want students. Learning to conform may take priority over learning to think.

Yet, wise educators know that liberation of the mind begins by putting students in touch with great art, literature, science, and philosophy. It is difficult for reason to develop and flourish within a curriculum designed to produce apprentice tinkers. A plodding, hangdog perspective of one's environment seals off light. Technology can function as the modern day Prince of Darkness within a society that values efficiency over pensive considerations. This is a dilemma but not an unfamiliar social phenomenon. Educators always face challenges of some sort.

We teach certain truths about computers or how to make systems models (which often amounts to making something out of nothing), but we do not consistently foster reason beyond standard curriculum limits. The ability to study through complicated, overlapping, human problems and probe for unforeseen events requires substantial patience and understanding. With this effort, a knowledge of the infallibility of humankind might be recognized. An education should induce a cautious humility and not swell one's fragile ego.

Reason can frequently influence a rigid truth and enhance our educational efforts. Abraham Kaplan, a philosopher of science, put it this way: "In short, the view that scientific

achievement is marked only by our ability to formulate the truth about any subject-matter in a single comprehensive model -- postulationally, and even formally, developed -- is no more than a prejudice."[12] Scientific truth without controlling reason turns out to be truth competing with truth. Political skirmishes develop. This pliant state tempts educators to produce trivial, quixotic truths on top of each other.

Technology exacerbates the problem with an induced system of blind devotion from a cadre of esoteric, true believers. These modern, technical sophists have nearly become oblivious to culture. They often speak in the brusque, self-assured language of their trade and avoid thinking. William Barrett, explaining the results of this diffuse, but cold, technical emphasis, said, "Intellectually, we have drifted much closer to the totalitarian attitude of mind than we are aware."[13] A most dangerous state that needs moderation from educators.

Influential political groups and other concerned citizens with a restricted television set mentality selectively ordain their favorite truth and attempt to implement policy with it. The complications of this simple-minded process lie in the fact that reason and understanding are frequently bypassed in favor of an expedient, idyllic solution. As an example: during our Vietnam military buildup, the United States, with half-baked notions of Vietnamese history* and culture, attempted to succeed

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*Walter Rostow, an advisor to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, made the preposterous statement that guerilla warfare in Indochina in 1946 was launched by Stalin. Reference Noam Chomsky, American Power and The New Mandarins (New York: Random House, 1967) p. 327.

with a military campaign where the Chinese, Japanese, and French failed.

Robert McNamara, a bright corporate man, the can-do man in a can-do technical society, represented a tragic, jingoistic foreign policy that was developed slowly from flawed, selective truths. David Halberstam reflects on Mr. McNamara's intense, driving ways, and portrays the limits of his knowledge and understanding: "He was intelligent, forceful, courageous, decent, everything, in fact, but wise. ...He knew nothing about Asia, about poverty, about people, about American domestic politics, but he knew a great deal about production technology and about exercising bureaucratic power."[14] Mr. McNamara was symbolic of a techology that had gone too far.

Careers in government can frequently be established and advanced through right sounding words delivered with heavy notes of self-assurance. Alexander Meigs Haig, Jr. is a good example (after becoming Secretary of State, he finally drowned within his own imperious heavy notes). Hans J. Morgenthau in his volume titled Truth and Power said technologies have given modern governments (people in leadership positions) the tools to penetrate and overwhelm the individual and his freedom -- to condition his thoughts and control his actions without limitation from outside.[15] What might an individual do to counter this force?

In a brief essay titled "Beware the Intellectual," Eric Hoffer with his overpowering, lucid style stated, "The intellectual is in his element commanding, coercing, brainwashing, and in general making people love what they hate."[16] Hoffer also

observes that the creative individual, no matter how highly endowed, must be hard working and disciplined if he's to accomplish much.[17] It is worth considering: Do our universities turn out creative minds?

Educators within large institutions frequently perform no better than the high principled but driven Robert McNamaras of the world. Michael D. Cohen and James G. March have examined academic life in their feisty volume and find few reasons to give praise. Tenure, they say, has been used as an excuse and explanation for bad teaching, bad manners, and bad research.[18]

As an institution devoted to finding the truth, education frequently does not accomplish its mission but other institutions in society also have problems with truth. It's a matter of understanding what they know. Just knowing a truth is not enough; a truth must be examined with care and dissected. There is always a tricky relativeness inherent in every truth. Care must be taken when making applications of a truth. All educators have a duty to expose and probe truths then apply reason and understanding. This is hard work, and it requires skill. If a student graduates with a head full of absolutes, then education has failed.

As a place to learn, an educational institution must be demanding, invigorating, enjoyable, and open to thoughtful reflection. But it is not a place to preach the one and only great truth. There may be some small truths available to help sustain the learning process; great truths exist in shallow, insecure minds.

Too often it is the well-meaning, dilettante educator who

spouts forth a profundity of great truths and fails to recognize the virtues of reason. Conflicts brew and inflated notions passing for learned papers are circulated around for examination like stale bread. This process can be innovative or it can be repressive. Marinated, scholarly concepts are routinely served up year after year. Some may be worthy efforts, and others represent tired, half-hearted attempts.

Modern aspects of education frequently place emphasis on control and technique over understanding concepts and exercising reason. A. J. Ayer has said reason sets boundaries within which truth and knowledge can function.[19] Some behavior within education today is frothed up outside a boundary set by reason. One visit to a major professional meeting within education will demonstrate how frivolous and trendy educators can be. It will also demonstrate the tight corporate nature of education, a modern form of institutional control.

In the era known as the Age of Reason (about 200 years ago) a thoughtful philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was formulating ideas about reason and understanding. He finished his Critique of Pure Reason in 1781.[20] In the preface he stated, "The subject of the present enquiry is the question, how much can we hope to achieve by reason, when all the material and assistance of experinece are taken away."[21] Kant said reason must approach nature in order to be taught by it. "It must not, however, do so in the character of a pupil who listens to everything that the teacher chooses to say, but of an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer questions which he has himself formulated."[22] Perhaps

reason should function nearly independent of formulated truths in order to determine proper means.

In 1975 a series of lectures by Michael Polanyi were put together in a book titled Meaning.[23] In one of the chapters, "The Eclipse of Thought," Polanyi takes the position that there has been a real substitution of human appetites and human passions in place of reason and ideals.[24] But why has this happened? According to Polanyi, a purely materialistic conception of man is responsible.[25] In other words, modern civilizations have become self-centered and infatuated with material pleasures. This interpretation is a simplification of Polanyi, but it cuts to a central issue -- reason is being diluted with material excesses. There is a connection between material excesses and technical excesses. Material excesses breed powerful technical structures.

Does this mean education is more interested in self-centered, materialistic concerns than teaching, research, and independent study? The answer seems to be a resounding yes in some quarters, but many educators are not interested in material concerns. A significant number are primarily interested in national recognition for their work, earning money by consulting with government or industry, and having influence in some significant way. This complication can weaken reason in favor of demands from technology.

Reason and truth within an academic environment often comes down to independent study that is measured against or compared to some accepted formal structure. Students are often asked to reason through problems and ponder various truths of the world.

It is remarkable and ironic to observe how much emphasis is placed on conformity in the name of independent thought. Students strain to find the single truth revered by their professors. This formal, vacuous, academic routine is designed to inform, discipline, and cultivate independent thought. Sometimes it works.

Whitehead speaks of reason as being shared with the Gods or being shared with foxes.[26] Reason shared with Gods is thoughtful and deliberate. Reason shared with foxes is fast and a bit uncertain. Students learn to emulate their crafty professors, so they begin to reason like foxes. They are quick and move smartly through academic matters to earn good grades then represent themselves as educated folk, as a God. Knowing how to defend a particular truth with an air of self-confidence is more important to a fox than being cautious, thoughtful or reasonable.

A superficial appearance of wisdom is cultivated to enhance status and protect natural insecurities. Students and professors perpetuate, to some degree, a low-grade knowledge base in a melancholy way. They are interested in a temporal view of the world that allows them limited influence and material security. Reason for the sake of reason is time consuming and often avoided; synthetic truths bubble to the academic surface like beads of water on waxy, ripe fruit. Brooding thinkers are tolerated, but quick moving, smart foxes are desired. Foxes are admired for their speed, self-confidence, and stylish ways. Administrators tend to behave like foxes.

From this supercilious campus activity comes a sincere

adherence to a particular cutting truth. It is not uncommon for teachers and professors to act as though they have special insights or magical powers. Sometimes they strut like peacocks willing to inform only the worthy. This "secret knowledge of the world" attitude is a frightening, frequently intimidating, barrier for timid students and can be a serious complication for productive scholarly work.

There are times when teachers take themselves much too serious, and they have difficulty understanding students. Perhaps they are burdened down with too much of their own academic buncombe. Delmore Schwartz, a brilliant and irreverent poet of the 1950s, once said in reference to the erudite Jacques Barzun: "...few authors have written so much and understood so little."[27]

While at Harvard, Schwartz observed professors and students as, "...pleasant and kindly, but all sleepwalkers who have hardly heard of history except as a course in the catalogue."[28] When Thomas Wolf was a graduate student at Harvard studying to be a playwright, he associated with Ph.D. candidates and characterized them as intellectual peasantry -- dull, cold, and suspicious of any idea they had not been told to approve.[29]

Lewis Mumford made an observation about academic scholarship reflecting a narrowness within academe: "Academic scholarship, in its effort to be scrupulously correct, to be faithful to the text, to pass on only certified truths, too often keeps remote from the student the process of thinking itself, and defrauds the beginner of one of the great incentives to creativity: his bearing witness to the birth of an idea in another mind."[30]

Certified truths, as Mumford described them, become the coin of the realm for many academic practitioners. But certified truths come to be political tools to be applied in situations where a particular kind of truth is required to open or close doors. In the case of human social activity (the arts, political understanding, and adopting unique patterns for change), a depth of reason with historical understanding is most significant. To think like a fox is exciting, but to think like a God can be breathtaking, courageous, and dangerous.

In spite of academic liberties taken with the development of, and emphasis on, certain adopted truths, students frequently come to understand reason as being a key educational outcome. Reason and understanding are not simple tasks. Educators work hard to cultivate discipline and freedom from unique perspectives.

However, intellectuals can become detached from their purpose like other professionals. They often work within a cynical, semi-isolated environment that focuses on day-to-day, tailored form. In other words, they are vulnerable to being trapped within their self-made, thoughtful cocoon. A mean, bitter core is sometimes formed. Hoffer, with his tendency to scorn the intellectual as power crazed, said, "It is natural to assume that the well-educated are more humane and compassionate than the uneducated. But, believe it or not, the reverse seems to be true. When Gandhi was asked what it was that worried him most, he replied, 'The hardness of heart of the educated.'"[31] From another point of view Michael Polanyi said, "Men need a purpose which bears on eternity."[32]

Perhaps the educational process is being thrashed about by a technical society that does not understand the properties of reason. Technology generates so many truths, there will always be a problem of priorities. When citizens fail to value reason over technical truths, then governments promote rigid technical solutions (i.e., military force) to solve complicated problems involving human passions. Why is it that we have no plan or agreements with other nations to reduce nuclear armaments? Part of the answer is that our military-industrial groups resist it on technical grounds. What is the reasonable thing to do?

Contradictions within education are also astonishing. While society crys for competent teachers in the public school system, it pays millions of dollars each year to recruit football players and basketball players for higher education. Yet, hardly a finger is raised in terms of scholarship funds to recruit bright high school students to become teachers. Our educational priorities seem to be linked to the public taste first and the public good second. Students interested in teaching are decreasing in numbers and perhaps in quality (academic ability) also. This situation exists along with other misaligned priorities in a materialistic, technically influenced society.

The hidden turmoil within education regarding reason and truth stems in part from the inability of society to recognize and expose meager, conflicting truths. We must keep our knowledge (truths) checked and not become too carried away with the aroma of sweet smelling, technical superiority. When the space craft Challenger blew up after launch on January 28, 1986, our technical

superiority in space was reduced to finger pointing and insipid recriminations. The ability to reason through difficult technical problems starts by learning to reason without fear or incumbencies. Scholars with a direct, logical approach help struggling students, but they frequently work in the shadow of haughty peers.

It would be a great simplification to suggest that all educators and students are in danger of being subverted by musty concepts and sullen academic logic. However, it would be equally simple to ignore what seems to be going on: a degradation of the academic dogma according to Robert Nisbet.[33] Nisbet believes academic traditions are in danger of being subverted by bureaucratic processes.

This country, for many reasons, has been able to grow strong and stay free due to an educated leadership and active citizen groups. Without a vigilant eye on our system of education, it could become a monistic institution used primarily to endorse technical mediocrity or political factions. This may sound simplistic, but the simple is not easy to understand.

Reason and truth distinguish education as an essential cosmic element within civilized societies. When a particular truth or spectrum of truths (e.g., technology) dominate, then education must cling to its roots without too much exultation. The problem requires serious reflection, moderation, and vision.

A depth of reason can be unlimited in scope, but it must be faithfully nurtured. Our system of education is a powerful source of enlightenment that needs constant attention. Without thinkers using reason, education may become a monotonous series of neat

sounding conventions.

Reason provides order through human activity despite the dulling hum from technical structures. Should reason break down, technology will become a substitute for thoughtful human insights. When that happens, our technical world (full of nuclear weapons) could quickly give us the final truth.

NOTES

1. Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education (New York: The Free Press, 1929), pp. 6-7.

2. Ibid.

3. Louis L. Snyder, The Age of Reason (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1955).

4. Ibid. also Alfred North Whitehead, The Function of Reason (Boston: Beacon Press, 1929).

5. George Santayana, Reason In Common Sense (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1980).

6. Ibid., p. 6.

7. Martin Heidegger quoted by William Barrett, The Illusion Of Technique (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), p. 242.

8. Ibid., p. 312.

9. Ibid., p. 182.

10. Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, Leadership and Ambiguity (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976).

11. Ibid., p. 149.

12. Abraham Kaplan, The Conduct of Inquiry (Scranton, Pennsylvania: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964), p. 288.

13. William Barrett, Illusion of Technique, pp. 314-15.

14. David Halberstam, The Best and The Brightest (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1972), p. 263-64.

15. Hans J. Morgenthau, Truth and Power (New York: Praeger Publication, 1970).

16. Eric Hoffer, "Beware The Intellectual." Saturday Review, November 24, 1979, not numbered.

17. Eric Hoffer, The Ordeal of Change (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

18. Cohen and March, Leadership and Ambiguity.

19. A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications, 1946).

20. Immanuel Kant, Critique Of Pure Reason. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).

21. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

22. Ibid., p. 20.

23. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, Meaning (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

24. Ibid., pp. 3-21.

25. Ibid., p. 205.

26. Alfred North Whitehead, The Function of Reason (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

27. Delmore Schwartz quoted by James Atlar, Delmore Schwartz: The Life Of An American Poet (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 340.

28. Ibid., p. 158.

29. Ibid.

30. Lewis Mumford, Sketches From Life: The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford (New York: The Dial Press, 1982), p. 266.

31. Eric Hoffer, "Beware the Intellectual", Saturday Review, November 24, 1979, not numbered.

32. Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books), p. 92.

33. Robert Nisbet, The Degradation Of The Academic Dogma (New York: Basic Books, 1971).